AT&T supplies CIA with customer data for a fee, says NY Times

The CIA is paying AT&T $10 million a year for call records used to help track down suspected terrorists, says The New York Times.

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AT&T's Global Network Operations Center in Bedminster, N.J.
AT&T

AT&T reportedly has a contract with the CIA to provide the agency with data on certain phone calls.

Citing information from unnamed government officials, The New York Times said on Thursday that AT&T receives more than $10 million a year from the Central Intelligence Agency in exchange for providing customer phone records used to help track down potential terrorists. The CIA gives AT&T the phone numbers of suspected terrorists in other countries, according to the Times. In return, AT&T culls through its database for any call records that could identify the associates of those suspects.

AT&T reportedly has a huge database of phone calls, both in the US and abroad, that go through its network. That means the database includes more people than just AT&T's own subscribers. The carrier's contribution is completely voluntarily, unlike a similar program from the National Security Agency, which compels companies to provide certain customer data.

Most of the information given to the CIA covers foreign-to-foreign calls, the Times said. But when an international call points to a call in the US at the other end, AT&T masks part of the phone number and does not reveal the name of the person on the US side. The CIA can uncover the full number through the FBI, which can subpoena AT&T for the information.

CNET contacted both AT&T and the CIA.

AT&T sent the following statement to CNET:

> In all cases, whenever any governmental entity anywhere seeks information from us, we ensure that the request and our response are completely lawful and proper. We ensure that we maintain customer information in compliance with the laws of the United States and other countries where information may be maintained. Like all telecom providers, we routinely charge governments for producing the information provided. We do not comment on questions concerning national security.

The CIA issued the following statement, which was sent to CNET:

> As a matter of longstanding policy, the CIA does not comment on alleged intelligence sources or methods. The CIA protects the nation and upholds the privacy rights of Americans by ensuring that its intelligence collection activities are focused on acquiring foreign intelligence and counterintelligence in accordance with U.S. laws.
>
> Under Executive Order 12333, the CIA is expressly forbidden from undertaking intelligence collection activities inside the United States "for the purpose of acquiring information concerning the domestic activities of U.S. persons," and the CIA does not do so.
>
> To ensure that the CIA's intelligence collection activities are lawful, the Agency is subject to extensive oversight from a number of entities, including the House and Senate intelligence committees, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the President's Intelligence Advisory Board, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of Justice, and the CIA's own independent Inspector General.

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